

How to Improve Your Prose

Series & Lists

Syntactiles (Syntax + Tactics)

In "Neat People vs. Sloppy People," the reader notices immediately Suzanne Britt's direct, decisive voice, and the brisk pace of her prose—qualities appropriate in an essay expressing sure judgments and sharp distinctions. One of the techniques that contributes to this effect is Britt's use of the series, a handy and rhythmic device for listing objects, actions, and ideas.

In the essay's third paragraph, for example, the author presents a gigantic series—six consecutive sentences beginning with the word "someday"—to itemize the grand intentions of sloppy people. On a smaller scale within that list, is Britt's series of scrapbook items that sloppy people will someday assemble:

Someday sloppy people will make family scrapbooks into which they will put newspaper clippings, postcards, locks of hair, and the dried corsage from their senior prom.

The series is not exhaustive, but simply suggests the kinds of memorabilia the scrapbooks will contain.

Britt uses a similar suggestive approach in two later series, the first on various types of junk mail, which neat people instantly discard, the second, on more important mail, which they handle efficiently:

All ads, catalogues, pleas for charitable contributions, church bulletins, and money-saving coupons go straight into the trash can without being opened. All letters from home, postcards from Europe, bills and paychecks are opened, immediately responded to, then dropped in the trash can.

Note that in that last sentence, the series of nouns and noun phrases itemizes the pieces of mail worthy of attention, while the series of verbs (opened, responded to, dropped), shows the recipient disposing of each piece in turn. Those brisk verbs enable the reader to see the neat person dusting off his or her hands with satisfaction.

The brisk, efficient tone created by a series of verbs comes through at other points in Britt's essay, such as this sentence in which she excuses the clutter of sloppy people:

They save everything, planning someday to file, order, and straighten out the world.

Here, the three verbs, quickly listed, suggest the clean organization sloppy people will someday achieve. Britt creates a similar tonal effect in her description of neat people:

The minute something comes into a neat person's hands, he will look at it, try to decide if it has immediate use and, finding none, throw it in the trash.

In the essay's final sentence, the author expands this technique, using a series of verb phrases, each followed by a parenthetical expression, to show the totality of neat people's desire for order:

... they will throw out the red geranium (too many leaves), sell the dog (too many fleas), and send the children off to boarding school (too many scrubmasks on the hardwood floors).

Exercise A:

Complete the Series

Use the structure suggested to complete each of the following series. Make your additional item similar in form to those that are given.

1. Our family couldn't adjust to the Florida weather—its hot, muggy afternoons, its sudden violent storms, and _____.
_____. (noun phrase)

2. With quick spin, the running back cut inside the linebacker, dodged two tacklers, and _____.
_____. (verb phrase)

3. Pulling out the book bag, firing up the computer, and _____

—these actions mark the beginning of a long night of study. (gerund phrase)

Exercise B:

Create the Series

1. Every clique in school was present at the party: the _____, the _____, and the _____.
_____. (noun phrases)

2. Ted finished his letter of protest with a smirk of satisfaction; then he _____, _____, and _____.
_____. (verb phrases)

3. The things mountain climbers love most about their sport is _____, _____, and _____.
_____. (gerund phrases)

—DAN LOOSE